

Was the Utah War a Buchanan Blunder?
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When James Buchanan was inaugurated as the Fifteenth President of the United States, a great party was held on March 5, 1857, the largest gala were held in Washington D.C. that had been held in years. The weather was beautiful and there was twice as many people as had attended President Pierce's inauguration. Mr. Buchanan press secretary (his nephew) James Buchanan Henry, described the inauguration celebration as, "The Inauguration Ceremonies, the ball, and the fine reception at the White House, by the new President, were very widely attended and successful. It happened that they took place during a short era of good feeling among all shades of politics and party, but unhappily an era of peace destined to soon end in bitter discord over the Leacompton Constitution or the Kansas question, and by the more disastrous following appeal to the passions of the two great sections of the North and the South which so nearly ended the Administration in blood."¹ It was recorded that 50,000 people witnessed the inauguration ceremony and that 15,000 tickets had been sold for the Inaugural Ball. It was estimated that 150,000 people lined the street for the procession.² The inauguration of President Buchanan was a great success. He started his Presidency on top of the world.

Today President Buchanan is on almost every list of Worst Presidents ever. Most of the time he is named at the bottom or in the bottom two worst Presidents ever to have served. Did the circumstances of the upcoming Civil War, his inadequate response to the South or his lack of commitment to the battle against slavery hurt him? What were the issues that led to his demise.

During the inauguration ceremony, President Buchanan was alone. He had never been married and the girl of his dreams had died several years earlier. In 1819, he had met the girl

¹ Homer T. Rosenberger. *Inauguration of President Buchanan A Century Ago*. "Historical Society of Washington DC" 1959. 96.

² Homer T. Rosenberger. *Inauguration of President Buchanan A Century Ago*. "Historical Society of Washington DC" 1959. 109-110.

of his dreams. and was engaged to Ann Coleman. Ann's father was a millionaire and worried about James Buchanan's real desires. He heard rumors that Buchanan was marrying her for his money. Her father convinced her that Buchanan did not love her. She called off the wedding. It devastated him and Ann.. Ann went to visit her sister and there took her life. Buchanan never got over this. He was the only bachelor President in the in the White House and never married.. His never got over this. . His niece Harriet Lane became the hostess for the White House during his administration³.

Soon after the festivities were over, President Buchanan knew he had to face the issue of slavery. President Pierce had not stood up to the issue and it had been his demise. President Buchanan did not want this to happen to him. On the day of his inauguration he met with Secretary of War John Floyd. They had discussed slavery and the problems. The Dred Scott decision was headed to the Supreme Court and as he said in his Inaugural Address that the issue of slavery was in the hands of the Supreme Court. At that moment in his speech, the audience went deathly silent. He knew this was a political suicide, not to handle this issue carefully.⁴

It was in this meeting with the Secretary of War Floyd first told President Buchanan about the Mormons. He presented a letter from William McGraw. It reported that "There is no vestige of law and order, no protective for life or property;the civil laws of the Territory are overshadowed and neutralized by an ecclesiastical organization, as despotic, dangerous, and damnable, as has ever been known to exist in any country, and is ruining not only those who do not subscribe to their religious code but is driving the moderate and more orderly of the Mormon community to desperation.

³ World Book of American Presidents. "World Book Encyclopedia". Chicago 2002. 94.

⁴ Robert H. Moss. *Guts But No Glory*. Orem, Utah: Granite Publishing Company 2006.16-17.

No class is exempt from outrage; all alike are set upon by the self-contained theocracy whose laws, or rather whose conspiracies, are framed in dark corners, promulgated from the stand of tabernacle or church, and executed at midnight, or upon the highways, by an organized band of assassins....”⁵

President Buchanan said that that the country had problems with these Mormons before. Floyd responded. Much. They have been disruptive in every state they have entered: Missouri, Ohio, Illinois. President Buchanan asked what he thought we should do? Floyd answered that you represent the powers of the federal government. You are Commander in Chief’ On day one of his presidency, Buchanan we presented the issue of the Mormons revolt.⁶

Another source of pressure of Buchanan to take some action was Judge Drummond. J

President James Buchanan used the letters and documents of Judge William W. Drummond for an excuse to send troops to Utah to settle down the Mormon uprising. Judge Drummond was the United States Circuit Judge assigned to Utah and he abhorred the Mormons. Judge Drummond used the reason of Utah as a Theocracy and that the Mormons were setting up a Millennial Order to reign as the government and reign with Christ as the head of the government. Polygamy was not the reasons, Drummond used in his letters to Buchanan. One would take this as a large surprise. Since polygamy is usually the reasons given for contention with the Mormons, one might find it odd that other issues were of more importance.⁷

Mormon is a nickname given to members of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints because of their belief in a book of scripture called the “Book of Mormon”. In a

⁵ Robert H. Moss. *Guts But No Glory*. Orem, Utah: Granite Publishing Company 2006.18

⁶ Robert H. Moss. *Guts But No Glory*. Orem, Utah: Granite Publishing Company 2006.19-20,

⁷ Utah Historical Quarterly “Utah War Version” Winter 2009 Utah Historical Society

Mormon Book called “Mormon Doctrine”, apostle and Mormon Scholar defined Theocracy and the Mormon view of it. On page 789 one reads, “theocracy is government by the immediate direction of God through his ministers and representatives. This was the original earthly government. Adam serving as the great presiding high priest through whom the laws of the Lord both temporal and spiritual were revealed and administered... The great patriarchs after the flood- Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and others appear to have had this type of government. When Christ comes to reign personally on earth during the millennial era, a perfect theocratic government will prevail.”⁸

In a Church of Jesus Christ of \Latter-Day Saints work of modern scriptural called the “Doctrine and Covenants” it speaks in sections 28 and 58 urging the members of the Church to prepare for the second coming of the Savior when he will reign and set up his government on the earth. Many believed that the Second Coming was just around the corner. It still has not happened in 2012.⁹

Such strong beliefs in theocracy would have the Prophet exclaim the word of God and the members would follow him explicitly. The logic, “if the Church was true then we must follow the prophet for the Lord will not lead us astray” was followed and is followed quite faithfully by the Mormons in the nineteenth century as it is today. This would lead the Mormons to vote in complete blocks. In Missouri, Ohio and Illinois, the Mormons would all gather to one spot. Their block voting would make them soon control the elections in any county where they gathered. The prophet or the twelve apostles would inform the congregations of the Lord’s

⁸ Bruce R. McConkie, *Mormon Doctrine* Salt Lake: Bookcraft Publishing 1966.789

⁹ “The Doctrine and Covenants of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints” published as a whole in 1835. Published by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints

desire and they would vote that very way. This block voting led to much resentment by the other citizens of the county. This with their economic controls within their community would lead to mad resentment and pressure to drive them from the communities.

Such controls continued on into the Utah eras. When a strong, arrogant judge with power came to Utah to set Brigham Young straight, it became an almost impossible task. Imagine trying to get a impartial jury to take on any stance of the Mormon church. They would always take the stance of the Church. Brigham Young, besides being the prophet, was the governor of the territory of Deseret and then the territory of Utah. There definitely was a power struggle between Brigham Young and Judge Drummond, both very strong individuals. Drummond asked for the removal of Brigham Young as governor and that an army would have to be sent to make that change happen.

The Mormons had set up an official body of the Church which was called the Quorum of the Fifty. The Quorum of the Fifty was set up in Nauvoo for the preparation of a government when the Lord Jesus Christ came to the earth. This body became a nucleus for a Presidential bid for Joseph Smith. He had announced his candidacy and had a great eastern following for his principals. Some sources believed he would get the Democratic nomination. He was assassinated before the convention. This Quorum of the Fifty traveled all over the country setting up organizations for Joseph Smith for President of the United States. They had ground root organizations in every state of the Union. His views agitated the government but had a great following among the people and the press of the time. The organization believed they had enough votes to get him nominated.¹⁰

¹⁰Allen, James. *Joseph Smith's Candidacy for President* "Ensign" 1999.

Such strong theocratic controls by the Mormons, led others without belief, to hate such beliefs. Judge Drummond was one of these. Drummond could not control the Mormons and as such believed that they were above the United States law . “Judge William W. Drummond was particularly obnoxious to Salt Lake society. He lectured polygamists for their immoral lifestyle while he was cohabitating with another man's wife. Of even greater irritation, Drummond, along with Judges George P. Stiles and John F. Kinney, all sought to recoup federal jurisdiction from Utah's probate courts, which the Mormons had been creatively using to circumvent federal authority.”¹¹

The stormy relationships climaxed when Utah lawyers broke into Stiles' office in protest and pretended to burn court documents and law books in the privy out back. One by one, Drummond, Stiles and Kinney each packed his bags and headed back to Washington, declaring in scathing letters that they had barely escaped Utah with their lives.¹²

While there was no mention of the Mormons, the turmoil in Utah nor the need to send troops in any Buchanan campaign speech nor his Inaugural speech, the Buchanan administration soon worked to make it the issue. While the Republican party has as its slogan against the twin relics of barbarism, none a lot was mentioned about the Mormons. They were 3, 000 miles away and that is the reason they had moved to Utah to be able to live their religion as they wanted.. During this time frame the territory of Utah had been scaled down, so to have less power and also to keep the silver mines(of Nevada) away from the Mormons. The Buchanan administration

¹¹ Donna G. Ramos. *Utah War: US Government versus the Mormon Settlers*. “Wild West Magazine” June 12, 2006. 14

¹² Donna G. Ramos. *Utah War: US Government versus the Mormon Settlers*. “Wild West Magazine” June 12, 2006. 18

wanted the Mormons to become an issue. It soon became the public issue of the country up next to slavery.. In an editorial in the Harpers Weekly Magazine sounded the call for action. It said, “ We do not call for fire or slaughter. No Highland clan sort of operation--no Glencoe massacre. But, at whatever cost, the United States must declare and vindicate its supremacy...”¹³

Senator Stephen A. Douglas identified the Mormons as “this loathsome disgusting ulcer”¹⁴ The people of the nation took up the call that the ulcer requires surgery and the United States government must cut it out. The issues of the first months of Buchanan’s Presidency was changing from the approaching Civil War to the disaster in Utah. Federal Officials and changed the focus of the country.

It wasn’t exactly Buchanan’s importance to go after the Mormons. It really wasn’t his emotional battle. It was his lack of leadership and control that allowed it to happen. William MacKinnon, a historian who has studied the Utah War for over 50 years summarized his findings as such: Perhaps the most important lesson that I have learned about the Utah War is that few Americans have even heard of it, let alone understand it. There is a sort of national amnesia about this part of our history, prompted in part by the overshadowing enormity of the Civil War that followed four years later and partly by embarrassment over the conflict in both the Mormon Church and the U.S. Army for different reasons. This lesson came home to me not only during my visit to Logan, Utah, on September 25 but also on September 20 when I spoke at a James Buchanan symposium in Lancaster, Pennsylvania. My hope is that what you hear tonight will prompt you to explore this colorful, admittedly offbeat subject a bit more.

So what was the Utah War? In one sense it was President James Buchanan's effort to replace Brigham Young as governor of Utah Territory and to install his successor with an army escort

¹³ Harpers Weekly. April 25, 1857 1.

¹⁴ Springfield, Illinois. June 12, 1857. as reported in the New York Times, June 34, 1857.

of 2,500 troops, a change that Young resisted with guerrilla tactics until a settlement was reached a year later in 1858. Over the years I have come to define it more formally as the armed confrontation over power and authority during 1857–58 between the civil-religious leadership of Utah Territory, led by Governor Brigham Young, and the administration of President James Buchanan—a conflict that pitted perhaps the nation's largest, most experienced territorial militia (called the Nauvoo Legion) against an expeditionary force that ultimately grew to involve almost one-third of the U.S. Army. It was the nation's most extensive and expensive military undertaking during the period between the Mexican-American and Civil wars. In my view, what it was *not* was a crusade against Mormonism to eradicate polygamy—the principle and practice were not illegal in 1857, and President Buchanan, a pretty good lawyer, went out of his way to make that point. Neither was it a campaign to suppress a Mormon "rebellion," a term that Buchanan used only cautiously,¹⁵

Buchanan's administration made some major blunders in the handling of this issue. In Buchanan's case, he knew shockingly little in 1857 about either conditions in Utah or Brigham Young's likely reaction to his removal as governor. Compounding this serious shortfall in intelligence was a series of horrible selection decisions—the appointment of a homicidal, ham-handed brevet brigadier general, William S. Harney, as the Utah Expedition's initial commander and Alfred Cumming, an inexperienced four-hundred-pound alcoholic, as Young's successor. These were appointments that bring to mind the old lesson about nothing being as expensive as bad management.¹⁶

¹⁵ William MacKinnon. *The Utah War and Its Mountain Meadow Massacre*. Mormon History Association 27 May 2007.19.

¹⁶ William MacKinnon. *The Utah War and Its Mountain Meadow Massacre*. Mormon History Association 27 May 2007.22.

One of the largest problems between Buchanan and Brigham Young was the lack of communication or means whereby negotiations could take place. In the Revolutionary War, Paul Revere would carry correspondence within days to continue on in a united front. Buchanan nor Brigham Young was able to make that happen. Had there been a transcontinental telegraph or a transcontinental railroad in place, none of this would have happened.¹⁷

Buchanan made the decision not to delay for official response to the Administration. The Administration kept information from what the Government's official stance was from Brigham Young. There was a call for action and Buchanan responded. He launched the largest US military action between the Mexican and Civil Wars.¹⁸

The journey of the army was being prepared. On May 28, 1857, General Scott order troops to assemble at Fort Leavenworth to gather to begin the march to Utah. The units that were assigned to the expedition were the 2nd Dragon, Fifth Infantry and the Phelps infantry battery. This would be at least 23000 men, This is one third of the United States army that was going to march the 3,000 miles to Utah. Food supplies and rations were to be transported with them for a six month supply. These supplies would be handled by 360 men, 312 wagons, 3298 oxen and mules to transport the food.¹⁹

Johnston's Army came to Utah with little resistance, other than some tactics by Mormon militia to slow down the Army's entrance into Utah. Extreme cold and harassment by Mormon guerrillas forced Johnston's Army into a winter encampment called Camp Scott near Fort

¹⁷ Richard D. Poll and Ralph W. Hansen. *Buchanan's Blunder-the Utah War*. "Society for Military History" Autumn 1961.121-131.

¹⁸ Richard D. Poll and Ralph W. Hansen. *Buchanan's Blunder-the Utah War*. "Society for Military History" Autumn 1961.121-131.

¹⁹ Richard D. Poll and Ralph W. Hansen. *Buchanan's Blunder-the Utah War*. "Society for Military History" Autumn 1961.121-131.

Bridger. Successful peace negotiations resulted in orders in the spring of 1858 for the army to march through Salt Lake City and on to a garrison site in Cedar Valley, forty miles south of the Mormon center. The Mormons destroyed the Salt Lake Valley to keep the army from staying there or having any of their means. They marched through the Valley to an area south of Salt Lake City in a small Mormon town called Fairfield, in Cedar Fort Utah. Here they established Camp Floyd.

“On 9 November 1858, amid gunfire and patriotic music, the soldiers of Camp Floyd, Utah Territory, raised the United States flag above their newly completed garrison. Named for Secretary of War, John B. Floyd, the post housed the largest concentration of U.S. troops to that time, in what immediately became the third largest city in Utah”.²⁰ Though originally intended to be an occupying force, the army found itself virtually isolated from most of Utah's citizens. Nevertheless, it organized its own theatrical productions, a circus, a temperance society, and a Masonic lodge (the first in Utah). During the three-year tenure of the post, the men engineered a unique watering system, planted gardens, and regularly honed their military skills through drills and instruction.²¹

In 1860, after Floyd's Southern sympathies caused his dismissal from cabinet, the post was renamed Fort Crittenden. Then, when fighting in the South escalated into the Civil War, the frontier troops were called back east to that conflict. By mid-summer of 1861 Camp Floyd/Fort Crittenden was abandoned.²²

²⁰ Audrey M. Godfrey. *Camp in the Sagebrush*. “Utah Historical Quarterly. 1966.

²¹ Audrey M. Godfrey. *Camp in the Sagebrush*. “Utah Historical Quarterly. 1966.

²² Audrey M. Godfrey. *Camp in the Sagebrush*. “Utah Historical Quarterly. 1966.

The Utah War was costly to poor President Buchanan. In the History Channel's book, "The Greatest Presidential Stories Never Told" says of Buchanan, "The troops that Buchanan sent ran into all sorts of trouble. They got to a slow start and ran into fierce winter weather. Mormon raids on their supply wagons forced them to hole up for the winter on starvation rations. Back east, criticism began to mount over how Buchanan was handling things. Newspapers began to refer to the venture as 'Buchanan's Blunder', It was proving a huge embarrassment to the administration. ...Buchanan may have been trying to divert attention from the growing national divide over slavery. Or he may have been trying to show the South that the Federal Government was prepared to use force to deal with a rebellion. Either way, it didn't work out quite as he planned. But the expedition cost Buchanan a huge amount of political capital, It crippled his ability to deal with the looming crisis between North and South. When Southern states began to secede, he refused to send troops--perhaps mindful of the criticisms he had borne for the Utah efforts. As a result, the Southern rebellion remained unchecked until Abraham Lincoln took office."²³

Secretary of War Floyd was a bad influence on President Buchan. He saw a vulnerable man, with need of help in his wisdom and manipulated him in favor of his sympathies of the South. Mr Floyd knew what he was doing. President Buchanan just allowed it to happen. Mr.Floyd knew that sending the troops to Utah would give the South an edge in the upcoming battles. Once his colors were shown, he resigned and went to help the South.

President Brigham Young of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints must also take some of the blame. He could have treated the federal officials with more respect and worked with them for both to be successful.

²³ Rick Beyer, *The Greatest Presidential Stories Never Told*. "History Channel". New York: Harpers Collins .2006. 68-69.

But it will be President Buchanan that takes the blame. In most narratives about his life, it never mentions the Utah War or his participation in it. Buchanan is blamed for the escalation of the tensions between the North and the South by unresponsive actions toward the situation.

“History has long since passed judgement on the fifteenth President James A. Buchanan, 1857-1861. Ulysses S. Grant claimed he never knew ‘the first Buchanan Democrat’ who was true and stood by his country in the hour of danger. Woodrow Wilson wrote that ‘Buchanan was past the prime of life, had never possessed great courage or any noble gifts of initiative’ and was weak; and weakness under the circumstances was fatal. Harry Truman ranked Buchanan among the bottom eight of his predecessors. Historians agree; in C-Span’s 2000 presidential survey, a panel of experts ranked Buchanan dead last, and a viewer concurred. Both historians and viewers ranked him last in Crisis leadership, vision, pursuit of equal justice, and performance in history.,, Buchanan was one of the most despised men in America²⁴

Buchanan ended his career with this statement, “I feel like my duty has been faithfully though it may be imperfectly performed; and whatever the result may be, I shall carry to my grave, the consciousness that I at least meant well for my country.²⁵ One should believe he meant well.

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²⁴ Allen F. Cole. *Asserting His Authority*, “Pennsylvania History” Penn State University Press. Winter 2003. Page 81-97.

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